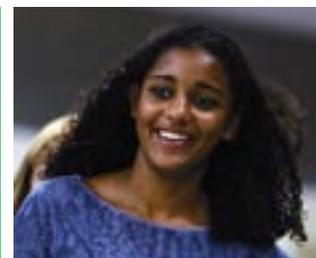
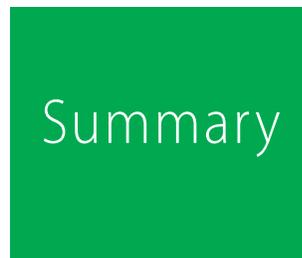




Course-taking patterns and preparation for postsecondary education in California's public university systems among minority youth



Institute of Education Sciences
U.S. Department of Education



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Summary

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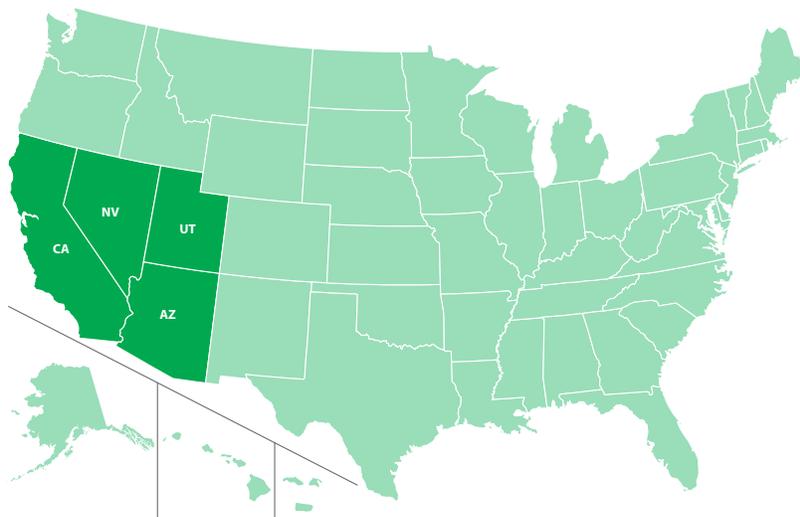
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Summary

Course-taking patterns and preparation for postsecondary education in California's public university systems among minority youth

This report finds that the high school program for college preparation begins in 9th grade and that making up missed preparatory courses and academic content is likely to be difficult for students who put off college-preparatory work until later in their high school career.

Throughout the states served by the West Regional Educational Laboratory education leaders and policymakers have raised concerns about high school achievement patterns and preparedness for college, especially for student groups that have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Gandara, Horn, and Orfield, 2005). Although the issue has resonated throughout the region, it was brought into sharp focus in California by passage of Proposition 209 in 1996, which eliminated affirmative action in public employment, contracting, and education. In a state whose high school population has growing proportions of ethnic and socioeconomic groups that have little college-going history, the post-Proposition 209 period has been crucial for developing policy to reverse the decline in admission rates for African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students. Both of California's public university systems—California State University (CSU) and the University of California (UC)—continue to focus on how to ensure that more students from these groups are prepared for and enter the state's public universities.

With affirmative action in admissions off the table the systems shifted to maintaining university access for students who are broadly thought of as “educationally disadvantaged” (Strategic Review

Panel on UC Educational Outreach, 2003). Within this category are students who come from low-income families, who attend schools with a limited college-preparatory curriculum, and who would be in the first generation of their family to attend college. One of the University of California's key admissions policy changes is the Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC) program, which “seeks to identify and enroll the top 4 percent of students in all of California's high schools, including rural and urban schools that have not traditionally sent significant numbers of students to the University” (Robinson, 2003, p. 2). To be eligible, students must have satisfactorily completed a specific pattern of 11 approved courses (called the “a–g” requirements) and have a minimum cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 by the end of their junior year.

ELC program staff who review student transcripts noticed a disconcerting trend among students from low-performing schools that serve high percentages of educationally disadvantaged students. Many students appeared to be missing required college-preparatory courses, rendering them ineligible for the program even if they otherwise ranked in the top of their high school class.

Efforts to increase high school success and college readiness for all students can take many forms, from improving dropout prevention to making sure that there is a highly qualified teacher in every classroom. But all students also need access to a standard college-preparatory curriculum. In California that curriculum includes the a–g requirements, which account for approximately three-fifths of a student's total high school

program and, depending on the student's grades in these courses, are seen as evidence of core academic preparation. A student who has a high GPA but who has not met all a–g requirements will not be eligible for admission to either university system.

This report examines the extent to which California high school students fail to meet the high school course requirements for admission to California's four-year public universities. It investigates students' course-taking patterns and whether the courses they take meet the universities' entrance requirements. Because students from a variety of minority groups have been and continue to be underrepresented in California's colleges and universities, this study includes a subgroup analysis by ethnicity.

The study documents patterns of high school course-taking associated with preparation for college and entry into two-year California community colleges and four-year CSU and UC institutions. The findings demonstrate a consistent pattern: students who complete college-preparatory courses in 9th grade begin a clear trajectory that continues throughout high school. Compared with students who do not take key college preparatory courses in 9th grade, students who do take these courses have a higher probability of meeting the complete set of CSU and UC course requirements. Students who fall off the college-preparatory track early in high school tend to move ever further from a complete college-preparatory program as they progress through high school. These patterns are examined by ethnicity and the overall performance of the school that a student attends.

Specific findings include:

- Completing one year of college-preparatory English and mathematics in 9th grade is an enormous challenge for many students. As early as the end of 9th grade more than a third of the students in the sample did not meet the CSU and UC requirement in English, and more than 40 percent of the students had not completed two semesters of college-preparatory mathematics. More than a fifth of students (23 percent) missed both requirements.
- By the end of high school less than a quarter of the students in the sample had fulfilled both the subject and GPA requirements for CSU and UC admission. Students are much more likely to not fulfill the subject requirements, an outcome tied directly to high school course enrollment. Many students are simply not enrolling in enough a–g courses to meet CSU and UC requirements, a pattern that begins as soon as students enter high school. For example, only 40 percent of African American students in 9th grade are enrolled in the courses that would meet CSU and UC requirements.
- Disaggregating by student ethnicity yields large differences in education attainment. For example, about half of Asian and White students have completed at least four units of English by the end of 12th grade, compared with about a third of Hispanic and African American students. This ethnicity gap in completion appears in mathematics and laboratory science as well.
- For students with similar GPAs after the first semester of high school, future college readiness depends on the school they attend. With equivalent grades after the fall semester of 9th grade, students in better performing schools are more likely to meet CSU and UC requirements upon finishing high school than are students in poorer performing schools.
- An early and complete sequence of courses raises a student's chance of attending a four-year California public college over a two-year California community college after high school. Students who take algebra I or higher, English, and a language other than English in 9th grade are more likely to attend a CSU or UC institution than a two-year community college.